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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: GEMAYEL MEETS NASRALLAH, WILL TEST HIZBALLAH
INTENTIONS

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Amin Gemayel -- former President, grieving father, and presidential aspirant -- met with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on 12/3. Briefing the Ambassador on the meeting, Gemayel said that he was taken aback by Nasrallah's hatred of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, MP Saad Hariri, and Ambassador Feltman. But Gemayel also held out hope that Nasrallah wanted a way out of the increasingly dangerous political impasse (an impasse authored, of course, primarily by Nasrallah himself). While Nasrallah would not back down from his insistence on a blocking minority in the cabinet, Gemayel picked up hints of flexibility regarding the special tribunal. He hoped that a messenger Nasrallah promised to send to Gemayel could work with a March 14 representative on a deal that would combine four elements to be implemented simultaneously: acceptance of the tribunal, national unity cabinet (with blocking minority), change of president, and adoption of a Paris III reform plan. Acknowledging the Ambassador's skepticism, Gemayel said that he felt he had no choice but to try, given the precarious situation in Lebanon. Gemayel's first test will be whether Hizballah lowers the temperature of the ongoing downtown demonstrations. Saad Hariri and Marwan Hamadeh told the Ambassador that they, too, were skeptical but were willing to give Gemayel a day or two to see if a Hizballah-Gemayel initiative shows promise. End summary.

DEEP HATRED FOR SAAD, SINIORA

¶2. (S) Squeezing the Ambassador in for a discussion on 12/4 before receiving the Jordanian Foreign Minister, Gemayel said that his three-hour meeting in the southern suburbs with Nasrallah the previous evening was surprising on several levels. First, Nasrallah's hatred and bitterness about Fouad Siniora and Saad Hariri was alarming. Dwelling on various examples of betrayal and treasonous activity, Nasrallah said that he has evidence that Siniora and Hariri infiltrated spies into the southern suburbs who spent July and August spotting for the Israeli bombers, via the U.S. Embassy, in hopes of killing Nasrallah. Gemayel noted that he was also surprised by the depth of hatred Nasrallah expressed for Ambassador Feltman himself, repeating arguments that the Ambassador had scuttled various deals between March 14 and Hizballah and had pushed the cabinet to the fateful 11/11 tribunal decision that provoked the Shia resignations. Also surprising was Nasrallah's "mild attitude" regarding Walid Jumblatt, with Nasrallah insisting that he had tried as late

as June to broker a reconciliation between Bashar al-Asad and Jumblatt. Bashar was even less interested than Walid, Nasrallah reported.

CONCERN ABOUT SYRIAN VICES

13. (S) Gemayel said that he was also surprised by Nasrallah's comments on Syria. Searching for a word and sounding several out, Gemayel eventually settled on "unenthusiastic" to describe Nasrallah's attitude about the Syrians. The Syrian secret police only want women and money; they are without morals. Nasrallah has tried to sensitize Bashar to the prodigal ways of his advisors, to no avail. But, Nasrallah told Gemayel, it was in Lebanon's interest to help preserve the Alawite regime, as the only alternative to Bashar are "the Salafis."

14. (S) Gemayel said that he, too, had his say in the conversation, criticizing Hizballah's arms and its decision to take Lebanon to war in July. The language of Hizballah speeches and al-Manar broadcasting is "criminal." Lebanese are not traitors for opposing Hizballah's weapons and should not be accused of being U.S.-Zionist agents. Hizballah is driving the country to civil war in its current campaign to topple Siniora, and Hizballah is putting at risk financial stability and Paris III-type economic assistance. At times, the atmosphere in the meeting was "very tough," Gemayel said.

NO COMPROMISE ON BLOCKING MINORITY

15. (S) Getting down to business for final hour, Nasrallah told Gemayel that there was no reason to discuss different

BEIRUT 00003757 002 OF 003

cabinet formulas: Hizballah, Michel Aoun, and Amal had all agreed that they would not back down from their demand for at least a one-third-plus-one blocking minority in the cabinet. "There is no compromise," Gemayel quoted Nasrallah as saying. If March 14 wants to reduce tensions in the country and avoid catastrophe, then March 14 leaders should accept that formula now. Nasrallah (like Berri) offered unspecified guarantees that they would not use the threat of resignations to topple the government frivolously.

NASRALLAH PURPORTS FLEXIBILITY

16. (S) Rejecting that any guarantees would be sufficiently reassuring, Gemayel said that he focused Nasrallah on what Gemayel described as "compensation" for a potential yield by March 14 of the blocking minority. He said that he found another surprising element of his Nasrallah meeting when he raised the issue of the tribunal as one such compensation. Nasrallah appeared "eager to find a way out" of the impasse over the tribunal. Nasrallah also did not reject a change in the presidency and he came across as positively inclined to facilitate what Lebanon needs to do for Paris III.

ATTEMPT TO SEE WHETHER FOUR-PART DEAL MIGHT WORK

17. (S) Gemayel said that he and Nasrallah agreed to see if they could build a package that would include something on four elements (tribunal, national unity cabinet with a blocking minority, presidency, and Paris III). Nasrallah promised to send a messenger to Gemayel either today or tomorrow to say who would represent Nasrallah in any talks; Gemayel hoped Marwan Hamadeh would represent him (a curious choice, in our view, since Hamadeh has explicitly accused Hizballah of planting the car bomb that nearly killed him 10/1/04). In Gemayel's concept, the two envoys would put together the basic agreement, with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri then renewing the national dialogue to work out the

details. The actual implementation would have to take place more or less simultaneously, to prevent March 14 from being tricked into giving up its two-thirds' majority with nothing tangible in return.

18. (S) The Ambassador expressed skepticism and asked whether Nasrallah wasn't really simply buying time, putting the March 14 movement off balance while Hizballah and Michel Aoun continued to ratchet up the pressure on the cabinet. Gemayel said that he was not convinced himself of Nasrallah's intentions, but that he felt that the dangers to Lebanon's stability are so great that he had to try to pursue all opportunities. Gemayel said that he would test Hizballah and be able to tell within a day or two whether Nasrallah seriously wants a way out. Once the messenger has made contact, Gemayel will insist upon a reduction in the political rhetoric and a lowering of the temperature of the anti-government demonstrations.

19. (S) Separately, MPs Marwan Hamadeh and Saad Hariri both expressed doubt to the Ambassador that Gemayel would get anything from Nasrallah. But lacking any ideas for new initiatives themselves, they approved Gemayel pursuing the contact for now. Hamadeh predicted that Gemayel "like Saad and Walid" would quickly learn that Nasrallah cannot be trusted.

COMMENT

110. (S) We believe that Gemayel -- torn between feelings of grief and ambition -- is engaged in wishful thinking about being the Great Compromiser/Savior of Lebanon. Like so many people before him, Gemayel believes that he might have the magic formula of being able to tap into that part of Nasrallah that he believe keeps Lebanese interests in mind. By all other accounts, Hizballah will do all that it can to block the establishment of the special tribunal and has already worked out with its allies a plan to push Lebanon more aggressively toward civil war in the coming days. In playing with Gemayel's mind, Nasrallah probably intended to get March 14 to adopt a wait-and-see attitude for now, giving March 8-Aoun alliance more time to increase its offensive. But one can hardly blame Gemayel for wanting to try to help avert the catastrophe everyone sees coming. And if Gemayel can pull off a change in the presidency to someone broadly

BEIRUT 00003757 003 OF 003

acceptable and get the tribunal accepted simultaneously, then handing the March 8-Aoun alliance a blocking minority is a price worth considering. We note that Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's bridging proposal, also tabled on 12/3, contained variations on the same four elements as Gemayel's initiative. We suspect that both Moussa and Gemayel will quickly see that, even if they can get agreement in principle, there is no meeting of the minds on the details. If Hizballah and Aoun wanted an agreement in detail, they would not have taken the steps toward civil disobedience and war over these past few days.

FELTMAN